Le Livre des XXIV Philosophes. Françoise Hudry

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Review
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manqué, for example, when he characterizes Roman British civilization as "infinitely richer" than that of the Anglo-Saxons (p. 48) or when he celebrates "the movement of the Latin mission from the central, radiating city of Rome to the isolated, benighted island of Britain" (p. 112). The terms "barbarian" and "barbaric" occur with conspicuous frequency. Discriminations of this sort have value only when supported by comparative study of analogous cultural phenomena. Early-medieval Latinity sometimes fails, of course, to provide appropriate material for comparison. It offers us no narrative verse comparable to *Beowulf,* for example. The gap can hardly be filled by redefining Bede's history as a quasi-Vergilian epic (pp. 63–64).

A similar tendency of Howe's is to subsume all aspects of native Germanic culture under the term "pagan," an antonym of "Christian" in his usage, as if there were no purely secular strands in this part of the Old English social fabric. On page 72, for example, we have a characteristic binary opposition of the "remembered pagan past" to the "enduring Christian present." In one confusing passage, Howe states (I think) that conversion would alter the Germanic identity in almost every respect. A converted Anglo-Saxon England "would be linked to the old homeland only through its barbaric language, which preserved the memory of migration" (p. 113). Howe notes Pope Gregory's tolerance of ethnic custom but goes on to suggest (without argument) that the resulting sense of continuity might have been an illusion (p. 115).

The author's dismissive attitude toward non-Roman culture tends to elide Irish as well as Germanic elements. We do find a reference to the fifth-century Irish warriors who attacked Britain, regarded by Bede, Howe tells us, as "island counterparts of the barbarians who sacked Rome" (p. 50). More positive contributions receive scant attention, however. On page 110, for example, we learn that Bede gives no dates in book 1 of *Historia ecclesiastica* for events between the Saxon advent of 449 and the Roman mission of 597. Annals at the end of the history are then cited as evidence for an intimate connection between these dates. Howe does not bother to mention that the annals record St. Columba's arrival from Ireland in an entry for the year 565. This date also appears in book 3 (chapter 4, opening sentence), where Irish missionary efforts are duly acknowledged. Howe is an eloquent guide to the main tradition of Old English Christian thought, but his identification with central figures of his study sometimes leads him to emulate or even to outdo them in repressing unorthodox voices.

It gives me pleasure to report that Howe's book is beautifully made, reasonably priced, carefully edited, well indexed, and kind to the reader in its style of citation.

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Françoise Hudry, ed. and trans. (into French), *Le livre des XXIV philosophes.* (Collection Krisis.) Brignoud: Editions Jerome Millon, 1989. Paper. Pp. 221. F 110.

Le livre des XXIV philosophes is a series of twenty-four definitions of God, each accompanied by a brief commentary. A prologue explains that the collection was the product of a reunion of twenty-four philosophers. The oldest manuscript copy of the work, now in Laon, is anonymous and dates from the beginning of the thirteenth century; a modern text has been available since C. Baeumker's edition of 1928. The work is short — hardly a couple of folios in the oldest copy — and yet it is extremely rich in its implications for Scholastic and Renaissance philosophy, to a great extent because its epigrammatic style lent itself to frequent quotation. It has previously been suggested as the earliest-known source for Pascal's well-known remark that the "reality of things" is "an infinite sphere whose center is all around it and whose circumference

is nothing." In this particular case the quotation found its way into Jean de Meung's *Roman de la rose* and thence into French literature; it passed into Latin through Meister Eckhart; Nicholas of Cusa made much of it; and Robert Fludd, Richard Crashaw, and the Cambridge Platonists were still getting much mileage out of it in the seventeenth century. A Platonic element permeating *Le livre* shares much with that in Pascal and Nicholas of Cusa in particular — and partly through them it passed into Leibniz's monadology.

Was *Le livre* really the source of the ubiquitous paradox of the infinite sphere? The very first definition of God offered in the book is "a monad engendering a monad, reflecting a luster (*ardor*) in itself." A twelfth-century Hermetic text with this definition is found in Alain de Lille, Alexander Nequam, Alexander of Hales, and others, who valued it in part because it suggested to them that Hermes Trismegistus had an awareness of the doctrine of the Trinity. It was the second definition offered in *Le livre* that Pascal picked up: God is "an intelligible sphere, whose center is all round and whose circumference is nowhere." This, too, is in the Hermetic text. Baeumker entitled his edition *Das pseudo-hermetische "Buch der vierundzwanzig Meister."* When Françoise Hudry argues that the hypothesis of a medieval neo-Hermeticism cannot be sustained, she really means no more than that she has another source to offer for the work.

Hudry maintains that the twenty-four propositions on God stem from Aristotle's *De philosophia,* now lost, parts of which she believes reached France at the beginning of the thirteenth century. Her first argument hinges on style. *Le livre* seems to alternate between the careful, pithy style of whoever was responsible for the definitions ("Deus est . . .") and the clumsy language of a commentator who often fails to capture well even the intentions of that writer. The explanation offered is that we are here dealing with two Latinists, one a good and the other a servile translator from the Greek original. This does not take us very far: the editor's crucial arguments as to source concern styles of definition and a trend in the concept of infinity used in successive chapters. The ennoematic definition, ascribed by Porphyry to Aristotle, puts common notions, before they are in any way elaborated upon, at the beginning. Such a style is found in *Le livre,* and other resemblances to the Philosopher are explained. (I must say I find them rather ethereal.) The editor next points to a semantic evolution of the word *infinitus* in the text — from an adverbial use (*in infinitum*), to an adjective qualifying number or act, to a determinant of impossibility, and finally to a substantive (*infinitum in se*). Jewish texts of the same period are said to show the same semantic drift, and it is therefore suggested that the explanation is to be found in a common Greek source. But which? Several possibilities are considered, and always they seem to point back yet further to Aristotle. Thus Cyril of Alexandria: Aristotle claimed that God "ascended the sphere of the universe." If this is all rather tenuous, at least what has been pieced together of the contents of the *De philosophia,* a lost Platonic dialogue of Aristotle's youth, is not inconsistent with the idea that this is the missing link.

There, if in any Aristotelian work, we are likely to find the positive concept of the infinite that Aristotle in his mature works rejected. But what evidence is there that it survived to the thirteenth century, as Hudry claims? She argues that it is the work to which Albertus Magnus was alluding when he spoke of Aristotle's *Epistola de principio universi esse;* and that it is, for instance, what Alain de Lille had in mind when he attributed *Aphorismi de essentia summae bonitatis* to "pagan philosophers" (*gentiles philosophi*). Are we convinced? The argument hangs together well as a hypothesis, but it would not be difficult to suggest alternatives at many crucial points. What I think is not very relevant to it, and even detracts from it, is the tail end of Hudry's introduc-

tion, where she considers writers such as Albertus, Duns Scotus, and Thomas Bradwardine, who in a broad sense "had the notion" of a "divine Infinite." Their views were in fact so intricate and so variously motivated, and so heavily dependent on Aristotelian arguments that had little or nothing to do with a putative Platonic Aristotle, that they would have been best omitted. Her grand thesis remains unaffected by these excursions into later history.

The text and translation are very carefully prepared, the former on the basis of the Laon manuscript, Bibliothèque municipale, 412, fols. 92v–93v. One short chapter at a time, Hudry presents the text followed by a French translation, setting all varieties of commentary to both in footnotes, except that translations of Latin citations are grouped together in an appendix. In view of the brevity of the work this is an admirable solution, and it makes for easy reading with a minimum of cross-reference. Bibliographical references are very much up-to-date. In a "Postface" Marc Richir adds a short essay in which he considers the image of God conveyed in *Le livre* and certain themes common to Nicholas of Cusa, Bruno, Galileo, Heidegger, and others. (This essay brings the work more in line with Collection Krisis.) For all its prefatory and postfatory embellishment, however, the greatest value of this small volume lies in its gemlike commented text. It is now assured a better fate than the *De philosophia.*

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R. D. S. Jack, *Patterns of Divine Comedy: A Study of Mediaeval English Drama.* Cambridge, Eng.: D. S. Brewer, 1989. Pp. 180. $56.

For those to whom up-to-date scholarship is not a sine qua non *Patterns of Divine Comedy* by R. D. S. Jack will provide a clearly argued introduction to the topic. The discussion of divine irony in the cycle plays is especially useful, as is the final chapter on early moralities. While not the definitive study of medieval comedy, this would be an accessible book for undergraduate reading. But is that enough?

A comparison of books and articles on medieval drama of a generation ago with the current crop of publications reveals not just an increase in numbers but a significant shift in critical approach to the plays. As C. Clifford Flanigan has argued (in the *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 35 [1986]), medieval drama never entered the canon of English "literature" because so many of the plays were resistant to a strictly "literary" analysis. The first attempts to recuperate the plays for academic study — in the 1950s and 1960s — used techniques of close reading and Robertsonian exegesis to prove that the texts were artistically and theologically sophisticated and therefore worthy of serious attention.

During the past ten years, the study of medieval drama has been profoundly affected by developments from archival work on production records to cultural, historicist, and feminist theory. These disparate approaches have in common a concern with plays as products of their society rather than as autonomous, carefully crafted, thematically coherent texts. Given this contemporary context, it is something of a surprise to find a book published in 1989 which (by changing only a handful of citations) could have been published fifteen years ago.

Jack's *Patterns of Divine Comedy* places the medieval English drama within the literary history of comedy and takes the terms of debate from an earlier era. Chapter 1, for example, compares the classical definitions of comedy as low, worldly, and scurrilous with medieval definitions of comedy as the movement from sorrow to joy, concluding that this comic drama must be read as "theological theatre in its aims and, to a degree, its auspices" (p. 10). Chapter 3, "Laughter and Wit in the Miracle Cycles," attacks